

## Sermon – 25/06/2006 pm

### Covenant Renewal – Written on Stone

Study Text: Deuteronomy 27:1-8

On the banks of the Jordan forty years after leaving Mt Sinai or Horeb *Moses spoke to the children of Israel according to all that the Lord had given him as commandments* (1:3). After reviewing the events of these forty years Moses went on to re-state and explain the Decalogue ('ten commandments'). This detailed explanation and application, the long sermon from chapter 5 to 26 has come to an end. Chapter 27 begins, *Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people saying...* What follows are instructions concerning covenant renewal.

Moses would not be crossing the Jordan. Moses led the people of God out of bondage in Egypt, gave them the law at Horeb and brought them to the border of Canaan. They knew no other leader, judge or prophet. How would they go on without this great servant of the Lord? How would they know the will of God?

Joshua would become their new leader, and there were elders and priests as we see mentioned in this passage. However, the covenant the Lord made with them at Horeb would be passed down from generation to generation without change. It was not dependent on any man, for it would be written down for all to see and all to obey, including the leaders.

#### Written On Stone

Despite the turmoil in his country, and the urging of the people, the president of East Timor refused to suspend the constitution and dissolve the parliament. He held the constitution in high regard, even though he was the most powerful man in the nation. Other leaders have not shown such respect for their nation's constitution. They took it upon themselves to suspend the constitution and be a law unto themselves.

In some ways the law of God was like the constitution of the nation of Israel. They were a theocracy. God was their king and he gave them laws they were respect and adhere to in fear. No man had the right to change these laws.

Some say the constitution of East Timor was drawn up in haste and has flaws in it. But we can be sure that the constitution God gave his people has no flaws. It was perfect, and as long as the people respected it and obeyed it they would live in peace and prosperity in the land the Lord God was giving them.

Now you will not find the word constitution in your Bible, but you will find the words covenant and commandment or law. God first made a covenant or agreement with Abraham, renewing it with Isaac and Jacob. He promised to make their descendants into a great nation, to bring them into their own land and to make them a blessing to the whole world.

As these descendants gathered at Horeb as a new nation, God made a covenant with them. He declared 'I will be your God and you will be my people'. These were his chosen or special people whom he brought out of bondage. These were people he loved and who were to love him. Under the terms of the covenant he gave commands directing how they were to live in love for God and for one another.

Before he departed Moses commanded that all the words of the law be written on whitewashed or plastered stones (27:2, 3). This practice of writing on plastered stones was known in Egypt. It may

have been the Decalogue only, or possibly all that he had just spoken in his sermon, that was to be written down.

This writing of the law on plastered stones was to be undertaken after they entered Canaan. *On the day when you cross over the Jordan (27:2)*, need not mean on that very day. It was to be done at Mt Ebal some distance to the north near Shechem. Writing on stone like this was not easily erased. This was to be a permanent record, much the same as we do on headstones of graves.

### ***This practice has a number of lessons for us***

Firstly, the word of God is enduring. It is imperishable or incorruptible. The words of men are short lived. Remember the little red book that was so popular some years ago – ‘the thoughts of Chairman Mao’. Do you hear of it today? It is the same with the writings of Marx and all other men. They are here today and gone tomorrow. They are like the *grass that withers* says Isaiah, *but the word of the Lord endures forever* (Isaiah 40:8, I Peter 1:23-25).

Written on stone the words of the Lord would endure. Maybe not forever in this form, but eventually they would be written even more permanently. They would be written on the hearts of men and women by the Spirit of God (Jeremiah 31:33). Are they written on your heart? How would you be if you were put in prison without a Bible – would you know any of the words of God?

Secondly these words were to be intelligible to all. *You shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law (27:8)*. Constitutions written by men are often difficult to read because of contorted legal language. On the other hand lawyers find the writings of Marx rambling and vague.

The word of God is *very plain*. It can be, and is meant to be, read by all, including children. When Joshua implemented this covenant renewal *there was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with women, the little ones and the strangers who were living among them* (Joshua 8:3.5). What a challenge to us today that even children and strangers listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

The Church of Rome teaches that the uneducated cannot understand the Bible, so keeps it out of their hands. Some Protestant churches are in practice much the same. Moreover, the era of Higher Criticism has eroded the confidence people have in the Bible; scholars tell us we cannot understand what is written unless we know the background and perspective of each writer. ‘To obscure, confuse or complicate the word in any way is offensive to God who gave it for everyone, not just the intellectually curious’.

Thirdly we learn that this law is obligatory. Moses did not invite the people to see what they thought of this law, and to modify it as they saw fit. Not even Moses was in a position to suspend this law. This covenant law was given by God. The people themselves declared they would obey this law (5:27, 26:17).

Written on stone the word of God was enduring, it was clear to all classes of people, and was to be obeyed by all. The Lord has preserved his word for us till today. It comes to us in language we can read and understand. We must obey this word for it is *the living and enduring word of God* (I Peter 1:23). It is the word that *is able to make you wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Jesus Christ* (II Timothy 3:15).

### **Altar**

Along with the plastered stones an altar was to be built on Mt Ebal. On this altar the people were to offer sacrifices to the Lord their God (27:6). This altar was a simple structure of uncut stones. To use a tool on it would have profaned it (Exodus 20:25). Why was this?

Some suggest that the people had no tools of their own and so would have had to use tools taken from the Canaanites. But remember also what happened the last time they fashioned something for themselves. They took gold and fashioned it with an engraving tool to look like an Egyptian calf god (Exodus 32:4). If they started cutting stones a Baal- type idol would probably have appeared!

Church architecture seems to have an inverse relationship to the faithfulness of the people of God. Medieval churches were among the most ornate buildings of the period. But the Puritans rejected such structures as exalting man rather than God – not to mention the incorporation of idols into their buildings. We often hear the argument that lavish and ornate buildings reflect the generosity and devotion of the people. But is this valid?

In our day we see the impressive Crystal Cathedral built in California in 1980. But if you listen to the worship going on there you will hear man being exalted more often than God. Which would you choose to worship in, a cold cathedral or a warm barn? You can be fairly certain where the spiritual temperature will be highest!

When Joshua came into the land there would have been plenty of precious and ornate materials left about by the Canaanites. But he used none of this in building the altar to the Lord. As Moses had commanded, he built a simple altar of uncut stones (Joshua 8:30).

## **Sacrifices**

The altar was built for the purpose of making sacrifices. It was not built to impress God or the other nations. Moses commanded that burnt offerings and peace/fellowship offerings be made to the Lord on this altar.

The burnt offering was an unblemished male from the herd or flock. The worshipper put his hand on its head before it was killed, and then its blood was sprinkled around the altar and its flesh burned on the altar as a *sweet aroma to the Lord* (Leviticus 1). This offering was like a sealing of the covenant or covenant consecration. When God made a covenant with Abraham he made a burning torch pass through dissected animals. When Elijah prayed on Mt Carmel, God answered by fire that consumed the bull on the altar. Our God is a consuming fire. He takes his covenant seriously and so must we.

Moses also commanded a peace/fellowship offering. The people were allowed to eat this animal minus the blood and fat. This was a covenant celebration, a time to rejoice before the Lord (27:7).

Jesus said *this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you* (Luke 22:20). Under the new covenant we make a solemn declaration every time we take the communion cup. We remember Jesus and his blood that was shed for the forgiveness of our sin. We remember the covenant God has made with us, and that in Jesus Christ we enter into our eternal inheritance. The early church shared a meal together at the Lord's Supper. Together they rejoiced before the Lord.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*